

OCTOBER 8, 1987

Sheep numbers in the Shortgrass Country haven't been announced to my knowledge, since the last drouth ended in the spring of '86. It's just as well, because woolie operators have been so excited about the prospects that they haven't made many accurate counts.

Nationwide, the sheep population is the lowest in history. However, the main cause of this decline, the coyote, is showing phenomenal growth and should be one of our most numerous predators by the next decade. While places like New Zealand and Australia have been bumping up against trade barriers and common market agreements to sell their wool and lamb chops, our country has been quietly headed toward being a world leader in the brown stick-tight flea and the all-season dumb rabies disease.

The shortage of sheep had kicked off a wild market for breeding ewes, rams and ewe lambs. It's probably costing 50 to 60 percent more to replace the woolies sold off in the drouth. For example, middle-ages ewes that were draggy at \$30 a head in the dry times could go fast today at \$75 to \$80. The few yearling ewes offered have gone at well over a hundred dollars; last week, at the Angelo sale, mutton lambs were dollaring out close to \$70 per head. The few sellers that were at ringside were holding on to their armrests so hard that I expected an outbreak of muscle spasms.

I've been avoiding buying the solidmouths and better in favor of the cheaper smooth mouth models. I'm tired of having to liquidate about every five years because of weather failure. This time I'm buying old sisters that won't last until the next drouth.

Furthermore, the banks are claiming they're through making loans on asset financing. If that's what the jugkeepers want, these gummer ewes are going to fit their bill, because they are apt to become a liability a lot faster than they are an asset.

Even in tough winters, aged stuff does pretty good out here. The thing about a smooth-mouthed sheep or cow that most ranchers don't think of is that she can get her tongue out farther to lick than a young animal that has to allow for a set of teeth. Also, in most winters we don't have anything to offer except fresh air, windmill water, and imported sack goods.

I think a cow in her early teens will inhale more cottonseed meal on the feed grounds than her stronger and younger sisters that do a lot of bawling and milling and running all over each other. As far as water is concerned, the amount of teeth doesn't matter. I agree that by spring the old cow is going to be mighty thin, but that's the case for anything in the Shortgrass Country that doesn't hibernate or go south for the winter.

In this fury to restock, sheep have been making a lot of money. I haven't heard what the return has been on the expansion of the coyote packs. Coon hides, they are saying at Mertzon, are going to be good this winter. Perhaps we are lucky to be stockpiling coyote furs for the time when the wool is all gone.